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ABSTRACT

Parent-teacher conferences sometimes become a cause for concern for everyone involved. This Digest outlines ways to improve communication during parent-teacher conferences. Suggestions are offered to help parents participate more effectively in conferences, including identifying what is being done to help a child overcome a problem, examining the teacher's expectations, creating a plan, and scheduling a follow-up conference. The Digest points out that even if a child is not experiencing difficulties, parents can contribute to the effectiveness of the conference by asking questions such as "What does my child do that surprises you?" or "What can I do at home to support what is being done at school?" (LPP)

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Parent-Teacher Conferences: Suggestions for Parents

Ann-Marie Clark

Parent-teacher conferences sometimes become a cause for concern for everyone involved—children, parents, and teachers. Children just beginning their school experience may be wary of the idea of parents and teachers talking about them behind closed doors. Parents may feel uncomfortable about going inside their child's classroom, sitting in small chairs, and listening to reports of their child's conduct and class work. Teachers, especially in their first years of teaching, may be uncertain about how to handle unhappy or critical parents. They may feel uneasy telling anxious parents about their children's problems. This Digest outlines ways to improve communication during parent-teacher conferences. Suggestions are offered to help parents participate more effectively in parent-teacher conferences dealing with children's behavior and learning.

Parent-Teacher Communication

If children are experiencing problems at school, it is important for parents and teachers to share the responsibility for creating a working relationship that fosters children's learning and development. Teachers can encourage open communication by letting parents know when they are available and how they may be contacted, inviting parents to participate in classroom activities, and eliciting parents' concerns and interests prior to a scheduled conference. Parents can introduce themselves early in the school year, letting the teacher know when and how they can be reached and asking how they can begin to become involved in classroom and school activities.

Open and frequent communication between parents and teachers helps to ensure that the issues raised in parent-teacher conferences do not catch anyone by surprise. Both parents and teachers benefit from being well prepared in advance of the meeting so that the meeting is less emotionally charged and takes place in a trusting atmosphere. Assuring parents of confidentiality also helps maintain trust. It may be helpful for both teachers and parents to keep in mind that for many parents, it is a fundamental part of the parenting role to be their child's strongest advocate (Katz, 1995).

Conferences between parents and teachers may become a prime situation for cross-cultural communication or *miscommunication* (Quiroz et al., 1999). For example, if a teacher says that a child is *outstanding* in a subject, some Latino parents may interpret this comment to mean *standing out*—a characteristic considered undesirable by parents from a culture with a more collectivist viewpoint. Asking for clarification of terms and more specific information may help to improve understanding between parents and teachers.

Some schools conduct student-led conferences to provide children with an opportunity to critically examine their work with their parents. However, for students experiencing difficulties, parents may wish to request a conference alone with the teacher.

Addressing Learning Problems

When discussing a child's learning problems with the teacher, parents can try the following strategies:

Consider the Context. Ask the teacher to be specific about the problem and the context in which the problem occurs. Children who experience difficulty in learning may do so for many reasons. They may be experiencing frustrations with peers, with family arrangements, or with specific subjects or learning situations. It may be beneficial for teachers to pinpoint both strengths and weaknesses that the child displays. Parents can then work with teachers to identify specific situations in which the difficulty occurs.

Identify What Helps. Ask the teacher what is being done to help the child overcome the problem. Ideally, the teacher has tried several strategies to help the child overcome the learning problem. Sometimes small steps, such as moving a child to a different place in the room or shortening an assignment, can make a difference. Often children find it difficult to let the teacher know that they do not understand what is expected of them. It may be helpful to have the teacher talk to the child about his or her problem along with the parent.

Make a Plan. Ask the teacher what you can specifically do to help the child at home. With the teacher, list three or four concrete actions to do every day. It may be as simple as a change in the evening schedule so that the child has 15 to 20 minutes of the parent's time to read together or work on math homework. A regular schedule is usually beneficial to a child. A young child might benefit from two shorter periods of work rather than one long session. For example, it may be more effective to learn to spell 3 new words a night than to study 10 or 12 words the night before a test.

Schedule a Follow-up Conference. Before leaving the conference, it is a good idea to agree with the teacher on what is expected of the child, what the teacher will do to help, and what the parent will do. Sometimes it is helpful to involve the child in these decisions so that he or she can see that the teacher and parents are working together to help alleviate the problem. A follow-up conference can be used to review the effectiveness of the plan and to formulate a new plan, if necessary. Scheduling another meeting after 3 to 4 weeks signals to the child that both parents and teachers are highly interested in taking effective steps to help him or her achieve success in learning. This strategy can serve to encourage a child who may have become discouraged from repeated experiences of failure early in the school year.

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Addressing Behavior Problems

When addressing their child's behavior problems, parents can try the following strategies:

Specify the Behavior. Ask the teacher to be specific about the type of misbehavior in which the child engages. Aggressive behavior may be a child's way of getting something from a peer rather than of intentionally bringing harm to another person. Inability to follow directions may be a result of a hearing or language problem rather than evidence of direct defiance of the teacher. It is helpful to consider many possibilities when pinpointing the behavior in question.

Examine the Context. Ask the teacher to help determine when, where, and why the misbehavior is occurring. Try to identify with the teacher any events that may have contributed to a specific incident of misconduct. Try to take into consideration anything that might be contributing to the situation: the influence of peers, time of day, family problems, illness or fatigue, or changes in schedule or after-school activities. Children may be more prone to misconduct when they are tired or irritable.

Examine the Teacher's Expectations. Ask the teacher to be as specific as possible about what a child does that is different from what the teacher expects in a particular situation. Sometimes, if the teacher assumes that a child is being intentionally aggressive, the teacher's expectation of aggressive acts can become part of the problem and can lead to a "recursive cycle" (Katz, 1995) in which children come to fulfill the expectations set for them. Try to determine with the teacher if the child is capable of meeting the teacher's positive expectations.

Make a Plan. Ask the teacher what can be done by both the teacher and the child to help solve the problem. It may be helpful to have the teacher call the parent if the problem happens again, in order to discuss possible solutions. Parents and teachers can look together at alternative short-term solutions. Often very young children may not understand what is expected of them in specific situations and may need added explanations and encouragement to meet a teacher's expectations. When young children understand the procedures to follow to complete a task, they may be better able to act without guidance. Knowing what to expect and what is expected of them increases children's ability to monitor their own behavior.

Plan a Follow-up Conference. Children are more likely to be concerned about improving their behavior if they believe their parents care about how they behave. When a parent shows enough concern to try a plan of action and then meet again with the teacher to evaluate its effectiveness, the parent sends a strong message to the child that he or she is expected to behave at school. It is sometimes beneficial to include the child in the follow-up conference, too, so that the child can make suggestions. Knowing that parents and teachers care enough to meet repeatedly about a problem may be more motivating than any material reward a child is offered (Kohn, 1993).

When There Are No Concerns: Questions for Parents to Ask Teachers

In some cases, parent-teacher conferences may not be very informative, especially if the teacher reports that the child has no problems. Some parents may repeatedly hear that they "have nothing to worry about." While this may sound reassuring, these parents may come away without the necessary information to help their children continue to make steady progress in school. When parents anticipate such an outcome from a conference, they may want to be prepared to ask some of the following questions:

1. *What does my child do that surprises you?* Very often this question can reveal to parents what expectations the teacher has for the child. Sometimes a child will behave quite differently at school than at home, so the parent may be surprised, as well.
2. *What is my child reluctant to do?* This question may reveal to the parents more about the child's interests and dislikes than they would ordinarily know. The question may encourage the teacher to talk to the parent about the child's academic and social preferences.
3. *What is a goal you would like to see my child achieve?* This question can serve as a springboard for parents and teachers to develop a plan to work together to help a child set and reach a specific outcome. Even well-behaved and high-achieving children may benefit from setting goals in areas that need improvement or in which they might excel.
4. *What can I do at home to support what is being done at school?* This question is always appreciated. Teachers may have suggestions for parents but may be afraid to offer unsolicited advice. The question helps create a team feeling.

Conclusion

Effective parent-teacher conferences take place in an atmosphere of trust, where confidentiality is ensured and parents and teachers treat each other with respect. When children have learning or behavioral problems, it may be helpful to examine the context in which they occur and then to formulate a plan of action. Sometimes it is helpful to include the child in setting goals and reviewing the effectiveness of plans. Children are more likely to succeed in school if they can view their parents and teachers working together cooperatively.

For More Information

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